

FIG. 2 is a diagram of each block in FIG. 1 and an interface between each block. The host computer 113 has a video and command data interface unit (not shown) that connects to the network server 105 and the print server 111. The network server 105 has a computer interface unit for connecting to the computer 101. The printer 107 has a video and command data interface for connecting to the print server 111, an image data processing unit for processing image data, a printer controller which has a CPU for controlling the printer apparatus, a ROM for storing a controlling program and a RAM for storing controlling data, an operation panel control unit for controlling an operational panel, on which the user may enter data and view displayed information.

The print server 111 receives data for example, a user password, a job number and an image data, from the host computer 113, and receives a job number and password inputted by user from the operation panel.

In this network system, data for printing is sent from the computer 101 to the network server 105, which processes the data and sends the processed data to the host computer 113. The host computer 113 matches a job number with the password (assigned to the user or established by the host computer) and the image data to be printed, as supplied from the computer 101 by way of the network server 105. The user is then free to go to any printer on the network and have the document printed therefrom. To this end, the user walks to a printer (e.g., printer 107) and inputs the job number and password on the printer's operation panel. Alternatively, the user need not be physically present, but send control commands to the selected printer 107, identifying the password and job number, as if the user had entered this information on the printer's keypad. The selected printer 107 then requests the password and job number be verified by the host computer 113, by passing the password and job number provided by the user through the print server 111 to the host computer 113.

FIG. 3 is a flowchart of an operation of the present computer-based network system and includes user operations performed by the user on the computer terminal, operations performed by the network computer or host computer, and operations performed by the printer server or printer. The process begins in step S1 where a user employs the computer terminal to dispatch a print request message, with image data, to the network server. Next, in step S2 the network server receives the print request signal, with image data, and sends a related message to the host computer. The host computer then registers the job number and password with the image data sent from the network computer. As part of step S2, the host computer sends the job number, password and the image data to the print server and also sends the job number and password to the computer display so the user can view the job number and password assigned by the host computer to the print job. Alternatively, the host computer only sends the job number, and the user merely uses a personal password, or no password at all.

The process then proceeds to step S3 where the print server registers the job number and password according to the information sent from the host computer. Alternatively, the job number and password are retained by the host computer and the print server remains passive and awaits the user to enter a job number and password on the printer's keypad, whereby the print server will relay the entered job number and password to the host computer.

When the user actually makes the print request, the user inputs the job number and password on the keypad of any

selected printer (step S4). The selected printer then sends this information to the print server, which in step S5 verifies that the inputted job number and password match that provided by the host computer. Alternatively, the host computer performs the verification. If the response to the inquiry in step S5 is affirmative, the process proceeds to step S6, where the selected printer prints the image data, and the process ends. However, if the response to the inquiry in step S5 is not affirmative, the process proceeds to step S7 where the print server sends the inputted job number and password to the host computer, which performs a secondary verification in step S8 and sends a result message to the printer server. In step S9 the print server interprets the result message from the host computer, and determines conclusively whether the job number and password from entered by the user are the same as those originally assigned by the host computer. If the result of the inquiry in step S9 is negative, the printer displays an error message and the process ends. However, if the response to the inquiry in step S9 is positive, the process proceeds to step S11 where the image data is downloaded to the printer and the printer prints the document.

In the above-described computer-based network system, a user who sends a print signal is able to have the desired document from any printer connected to the network. Furthermore, the user may have the document printed with a reasonably high degree of certainty that the confidentiality of the document will not be compromised because only users who know the password and job number are able to activate the printing of the document at the selected printer.

This invention may be conveniently implemented using a conventional general purpose digital computer or microprocessor programmed according to the teachings of the present specification, as will be apparent to those skilled in the computer art. Appropriate software coding can readily be prepared by skilled programmers based on the teachings of the present disclosure, as will be apparent to those skilled in the software art. The invention may also be implemented by the preparation of application specific integrated circuit or by interconnecting an appropriate network of conventional components, as will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art.

This application is based on Japanese patent application 9-058482 filed in the Japanese Patent Office on Feb. 25, 1997, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

What is claimed as new and is desired to be secured by Letters Patent of the United States is:

1. A network print system comprising:

- a computer terminal having,
  - a processor,
  - a computer user interface, and
  - a computer display, said processor being configured to produce a print request message in response to information provided through said computer user interface, said print request message containing image data, and said print request message not uniquely identifying a device for printing said image data;
- a plurality of printers communicatively coupled to said computer terminal, said plurality of printers each having a printer user interface with a data input device and a data display device; and
- a host computer communicatively coupled to said plurality of printers and said computer terminal and configured to receive said print request message, said host computer having

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a memory in which said image data is stored, and  
 a host computer processor configured to produce a job  
 number associated with said print request message  
 and send said job number to said computer terminal,  
 wherein  
 said computer terminal being configured to display on  
 said computer display an indication of said job number  
 provided by said host computer,  
 said host computer processor being configured to recog-  
 nize when said job number is input to a particular  
 printer of said plurality of printers via said printer user  
 interface and configured to, based on said job number  
 input, associate said particular printer with said print  
 request message and identify the particular printer as  
 the printer for receiving the print request message, and  
 provide said image data to said identified particular  
 printer for printing so that a user can input said job  
 number into any one of the plurality of printers in order  
 to print the image data at the printer into which the user  
 input the job number.

2. A network print system comprising:

a computer terminal having,  
 a processor,  
 a computer user interface configured to receive a pass-  
 word entered by a user, and  
 a computer display, said processor being configured to  
 produce a print request message containing image  
 data and said password, said print request message  
 not uniquely identifying a device for printing said  
 image data;

a plurality of printers communicatively coupled to said  
 computer terminal, said plurality of printers each hav-  
 ing a printer user interface with a data input device and  
 a data display device; and

a host computer communicatively coupled to said plural-  
 ity of printers and said computer terminal, and config-  
 ured to receive said print request message, said host  
 computer having  
 a memory in which said image data and said password  
 are stored, and  
 a host computer processor configured to produce a job  
 number associated with said print request message,  
 store said job number in said memory in association  
 with said image data and said password, and send  
 said job number to said computer terminal, wherein  
 said computer terminal being configured to display on  
 said computer display an indication of said job number  
 provided by said host computer, and  
 said host computer processor being configured to recog-  
 nize when said job number and said password are input  
 to a particular printer of said plurality of printers via  
 said printer user interface and configured to, based on  
 said job number input, associate said particular printer  
 with said print request message and identify the par-  
 ticular printer as the printer for receiving the print  
 request message and provide said image data to said  
 identified particular printer for printing so that the user  
 can input said job number and said password into any  
 one of the plurality of printers in order to print the  
 image data at the printer into which the user input the  
 job number and said password.

3. A network print system comprising:

a computer terminal having,  
 a processor,  
 a computer user interface, and  
 a computer display, said processor being configured to  
 produce a print request message containing image

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data, said print request message not uniquely iden-  
 tifying a device for printing said image data;

a plurality of printers coupled to said computer terminal,  
 each printer having  
 a printer user interface with a data input device and a  
 data display device, and  
 a printer memory configured to hold a user password,  
 a host computer coupled to said plurality of printers and  
 said computer terminal, and configured to receive said  
 print request message, said host computer having  
 a host computer memory in which said image data is  
 stored, and  
 a host computer processor configured to produce a job  
 number associated with said print request message,  
 store said job number in said host computer memory  
 in association with said image data, and send said job  
 number to said computer terminal, wherein  
 said computer terminal being configured to display on  
 said computer display an indication of said job number  
 provided by said host computer,

at least one of said host computer and said plurality of  
 printers being configured to determine if an input data  
 input through said printer user interface of a particular  
 printer of said plurality of printers matches said job  
 number, and if so, to associate said particular printer  
 with said print request message, identify the particular  
 printer as the printer for receiving the print request  
 message and provide said image data to said particular  
 printer,

each of said plurality of printers being configured to  
 determine whether a password input via said printer  
 user interface matches said password stored in said  
 printer memory and if so printing a document corre-  
 sponding to said image data so that a user can input said  
 input data and a password into any one of the plurality  
 of printers in order to print the image data at the printer  
 into which the user input the input data and the pass-  
 word.

4. A secure method for printing a document in a network  
 print system having a plurality of printers, comprising the  
 steps of:

receiving an image data at a first network terminal;  
 producing a print request message at said first network  
 terminal and sending said print request message and  
 said image data to a second network terminal, said print  
 request message not uniquely identifying a device for  
 printing said image data;

storing in memory said image data and an associated job  
 number at said second network terminal;

sending a reply message to said first network terminal  
 from said second network terminal, said reply message  
 including said associated job number;

displaying said associated job number at said first network  
 terminal;

receiving a local print request message at said second  
 network terminal from a particular printer of said  
 plurality of printers, said local request message having  
 an input job number; and

comparing said input job number with said associated job  
 number and if said input job number matches said  
 associated job number, associating said particular  
 printer with said print request message and identifying  
 the particular printer as the printer for receiving the  
 print request message, and printing from said identified  
 particular printer a document corresponding to said

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image data so that a user can input said input job number into any one of the plurality of printers in order to print the image data at the printer into which the user input the input job number.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein:

the storing step includes storing said image data and said associated job number at a host computer, said second network terminal comprising said host computer and at least one printer, said at least one printer having a printer user interface;

the step of receiving the local print request message at the second network terminal includes inputting the input job number on the printer user interface of any one of said at least one printer; and

the comparing step includes comparing at the host computer the input job number with the associated job number.

6. The method of claim 4, wherein:

said receiving an image data step includes receiving a password;

the producing a print request message step includes sending the password;

the storing step includes storing said password;

the step of receiving a local print request message includes receiving an input password; and

the comparing step includes comparing the password with the input password and printing the image data if said input password matches said password.

7. The method of claim 4, further comprising:

storing an assigned password at the second network terminal;

inputting a local password at any one of said plurality of printers; and

comparing the local password with the assigned password, wherein

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said step of printing from said any one of said plurality of printers comprises printing said document only if said local password matches said assigned password.

8. A secure network print system having a plurality of printers, comprising:

means for receiving an image data at a first network terminal;

means for producing a print request message not uniquely identifying a device for printing said image data at said first network terminal and for sending said print request message and said image data to a second network terminal;

means for storing in memory said image data and an associated job number at said second network terminal;

means for sending a reply message to said first network terminal from said second network terminal, said reply message including said associated job number;

means for displaying said associated job number at said first network terminal;

means for inputting a local print request message at a particular printer of said plurality of printers, said local print request message having an input job number;

means for sending said local print request message to said second network terminal; and

means for comparing said input job number with said associated job number and if said input job number matches said associated job number associating said particular printer with said print request message and identifying the particular printer as the printer for receiving the print request message, and printing from said identified particular printer a document corresponding to said image data so that a user can input said input job number into any one of the plurality of printers in order to print the image data at the printer into which the user input the input job number.

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